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### **The return of wind turbines and solar cells**

After a decade of sluggishness, renewable energy gets a second wind as states promote fossil-fuel alternatives.

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If you think "green power" went the way of "flower power," think again. Alternative energy is making a sudden comeback.

After a decade-long lapse in interest and funding, efforts to find alternatives to fossil-fuel energy have reignited from Massachusetts to California. But unlike years past, the major impetus is not from Capitol Hill, but rather from individual states.

In fact, states' commitments to wind, solar, geothermal, and biomass power is up 40 percent from 1997 levels, with 22 states now offering customers a green-power choice. That's akin to taking 3.4 million cars off the road, says the Union of Concerned Scientists in Cambridge, Mass., which has issued a survey of state support.

In fact, at \$381 million, Massachusetts is second only to California in the money it plans to invest in renewable-energy projects. The list of states making large commitments keeps growing. Last week, for instance, Arizona became one of the first states to require its utility companies to produce a percentage of their electricity from solar power.

"This surge of interest is an important step in the right direction," says Alan Noguee, energy director with the Union of Concerned Scientists. "These actions won't solve all our energy problems, but they'll help ensure that the industry keeps growing and that prices keep dropping."

Some of the ways states are promoting green power include:

\*Renewable-electricity standards. Twelve states have set standards for utility companies regarding how much of their power sales must come from renewables.

\*Renewable-electricity funds. Thirteen states have established funds for the development of renewables. Combined, they will collect an estimated \$2 billion by 2012.

\*Net metering. Thirty states have adopted policies to make it easier and more affordable for customers to generate their own power from renewable-energy systems.

\*Disclosure of fuels and emissions. Fifteen states require electricity providers to disclose on utility bills the environmental impacts of their products.

Only three states, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Jersey, have adopted all four policies. By contrast, 20 states don't have even one.

The road to alternative energy has been a rocky one. Since the oil crisis of the mid-1970s, policymakers and industry officials have argued over how best to reduce America's dependence on fossil fuels.

In 1978, Congress enacted the Public Utilities Regulatory Policies Act, requiring electric utilities to buy renewable energy whenever it is less expensive. Millions of dollars went into developing such power sources, which went from 0 to 2 percent of total US energy output by 1990.

Today, renewable energy constitutes 3 percent of US energy use - thanks, in large part, to states wanting to deregulate the electric industry, promote competition, and improve the environment.

"The utility industry is going through significant restructuring - led by states and not the federal government," says Michael Marvin, president of the Business Council for Sustainable Energy in Washington. "The federal government is almost certainly not doing enough [with renewable energy], even when poll after poll shows that's what people want."

The US Energy Department, though, says it is doing its part. Last week, Energy Secretary Bill Richardson announced that all federal buildings in Colorado will be powered partly by wind - the largest US contract ever for green power. Earlier, he awarded \$5 million in grants to develop geothermal energy in six Western states.

Not all the activity is at the governmental level. This month, Texaco - the third largest US oil company - invested \$67.3 million in an alternative-energy company developing technologies such as fuel cells. A day later, BP Amoco,

the world's third largest oil company, agreed to invest as much as \$100 million in GreenMountain.com, a firm that sells solar- and wind-generated electricity.

The activity indicates that even companies built on fossil fuel are warming to renewable energy, says Seth Dunn, an energy researcher with Worldwatch in Washington. "The business community has traditionally been skeptical of renewables" he says. "But it's clear this industry is here to stay."

Compared with Germany and Japan, though, US progress has been slow. Globally, use of wind power grew 39 percent in 1999, while oil use increased only 1 percent. The burning of coal, which launched the Industrial Revolution, declined by 3 percent.

But a full 97 percent of US power still comes from fossil fuels, hydropower, and nuclear plants. The alternative-energy industry here "has grown from infinitesimal to tiny with an eye toward small," says Mr. Marvin. (c) Copyright 2000. The Christian Science Publishing Society

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